

Statement of Congressman Henry A. Waxman to the CARES Commission
September 29, 2003
Long Beach, California

Members of the CARES Commission:

Good morning, and thank you for holding this important hearing. Unfortunately, the religious holiday prevented me from traveling from Washington over the weekend to be with you, but my district director, Lisa Pinto, will read my statement on my behalf.

I strongly oppose the creation of a Desert Pacific Healthcare Network Land Use Planning Committee to determine the reuse of so-called "excess land" at the WLAHC. The limited information we have been provided on the proposal offers ample reasons to oppose it:

1. None of the publicly available CARES documents specifically identify land on the WLAHC campus the VA considers "excess." Further, although Section C of the Market Plan indicates that Network 22's excess land use policy would be submitted as part of the CARES Market Plan, it has not been included in any public documents.
2. The proposed Land Use Committee would consist of six internal VA health care administrators. No veterans, veterans' service organizations, members of the community, planning experts or elected officials would be represented.
3. None of the public CARES documents discuss the VA's requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and other applicable federal laws as they pertain to excess property or the proposed demolition of buildings.

Even if these serious flaws could be corrected, however, the Commission should flatly reject the proposed Land Use Committee because Congress has already enacted legislation on this matter.

Section 707 of the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-368) requires the development of a land use master plan for the WLAHC. After years of contentious debate, this law, which has not yet been fulfilled, promises a comprehensive long-term solution for land use.

As you know, the VA rejected the controversial plan that was submitted in April 2001, and Secretary Principi subsequently committed to initiate a new master land use plan **after** the CARES process is concluded. I would like to submit a letter Secretary Principi wrote on this matter for the record.

I would also like to submit a joint letter Senator Boxer, Senator Feinstein, and I sent Secretary Principi on August 6, 2003 that outlines our strong opposition to the proposed Land Use Committee and our support for the timetable set out by the Secretary for the development of a land use master plan.

Another area of concern I have about the CARES process is that the lack of basic information available to the public has made it virtually impossible to evaluate Network 22's and the Commission's proposals and offer meaningful input.

Just six days prior to its April 15 submission to the CARES Commission, Network 22 provided my staff and a limited number of stakeholders with a very general power point presentation and description of the proposed Land Use Planning Committee. One additional follow-up meeting was held with some stakeholders, but no specifics were provided, nor were any questions answered. Unfortunately, many of us continue to have more questions than answers about the VA's plans for Network 22.

Finally, I want to take a moment to highlight the unique characteristics of the WLAHC and provide some context for the strong veteran and community interest in its future. This property was deeded to the VA after the Civil War on the strict condition that it be used to benefit veterans. Veterans have repeatedly expressed their concern about a shortage of programs on the campus for homeless veterans, veterans in transition, and aging veterans. A comprehensive land use plan will allow the VA to satisfy the deed's conditions and more effectively serve our veterans.

The WLAHC is also the largest VA facility in the nation. It is surrounded by dense residential neighborhoods and congested traffic systems. A comprehensive land use process is critical to ensuring that the quality of life of the residents in this heavily populated urban area is not impaired.

The piecemeal nature of land use planning at the WLAHC has been an utter failure. I urge you to reject the creation of a Desert Pacific Healthcare Network Land Use Planning Committee so we can stay the course Congress mandated and adhere to the timetable Secretary Principi has laid out.

In closing, I request that the Commission accept written statements from interested individuals who have not had an opportunity to testify today. I would also like to submit hundreds of letters and postcards I have received from veterans and the community voicing strong opposition to the proposed Land Use Planning Committee.

Again, thank you for holding this hearing.